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## A New Left and a New Right

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Public proclamation of the Emancipation Edict came in late February 1861. Those who remembered the occasion in their diaries and memoirs have left us the most varied descriptions of how the great day went in the principal cities of the empire. Some could recollect scenes of wild rejoicing; others remembered that it was business as usual; still others recalled the dire (and accurate) premonitions about the future that possessed them and a few other farsighted observers.

X The government was concerned most of all with how the peasants would take their liberty. The settlement was by any reckoning immensely complicated, and the edict was written in the most stilted and arcane kind of bureaucratic language, full of elaborate and pious formulas—perhaps in the semiconscious hope that the peasants would be so exhausted by the effort to understand it that they would have no energy left for rebellion. And it was released during Lent, at which time the makers of high policy banked on a penitential atmosphere; indeed, an outside observer might well conclude that such an Emancipation had been visited on Russia's former serfs as a penance. And apparently the efforts of the government were crowned with success in at least this respect: it took peasant Russia a long time to make head or tail of what had happened.

In retrospect, historians have expressed surprise that the Emancipation went off as quietly as it did, in view of the enormous disappointment that the hopes of the peasants sustained.



But the view was different in the fall of 1861. There had been a big disturbance in the village of Bezdna the previous spring, resulting in the massacre of several hundred peasants by government troops, and there had been many smaller disorders. Most educated people believed that the peasants had not finished expressing themselves about the Emancipation: some rejoiced at the prospect, others regarded it with trepidation.

By the time the students were released from prison in December 1861, St. Petersburg was in a highly strained, nervous, and expectant state. Public support for them was running high; they and their liberal sympathizers were anticipating new developments in the village and perhaps elsewhere. Land and Liberty, the first real revolutionary organization of the 1860s, began to take shape in late 1861, and it was predicated on the notion that peasant revolts on a large scale were inevitable within a year or two and that the "people's friends" and sympathizers among the educated classes had better be ready to guide and assist the spontaneous expression of the people's rage.

Moreover, in 1861 and early 1862 so many revolutionary manifestos were printed and distributed that Soviet historians have sometimes referred to the period as the "era of proclamations." Probably the best known was entitled *To the Young Generation*, written by Mikhail Mikhailov and Nikolai Shelgunov.<sup>1</sup> Although Herzen did not approve of the operation, his Free Russian Press in London printed it, and six hundred copies were smuggled into Russia in the summer of 1861, a great many of which ended up in St. Petersburg, in part because some of the student leadership helped distribute it. *To the Young Generation* was in fact addressed directly to the students. Its message was simple and straightforward: "Imperial Russia is in dissolution." The only vital forces in the country were the peasants, the intelligentsia, and the students. The Romanovs were no longer needed; a popular republic, based on the communal institutions of the peasantry, should replace them. The manifesto did not talk about seizing power, but certain of its phraseology expressed direct hostility toward Western Europe and its economic doctrines; the distinct echo of Herzen's Russian socialism could be heard.



The *Great Russian* (*Velikoruss*), three issues of which appeared between July and October 1861, was even vaguer and considerably more moderate. It was, in essence, an appeal to *obshchestvo* to prevent the bankrupt government of Alexander from creating a massive peasant insurrection. In a somewhat roundabout way, the *Great Russian* prescribed a more generous settlement for the peasants and a constitution for the country, together with the liberation of Poland. The tone of the *Great Russian* was moderate; it was couched as an appeal to Alexander to put himself in touch with the living forces of the country, rather than a demand that those forces make an end of him.<sup>2</sup>

These were only the most notable of the barrage of anonymous appeals, programs, and denunciations that appeared on the streets and in the mails within the space of a few months. Some were written by students—appeals not to accept the *matrikuly*, and so on—and even these generally had some broader political content, if only an exhortation to work together for “the people’s freedom.” And the number of entreaties to the troops not to fire on Russian peasants or on Poles indicated that some radicals were hoping for support among the soldiers. These appeals were particularly unsettling to the government.

Even the foreign political events of 1861 brought hope to those who were hoping and working for change and upheaval. The Russian government’s attempt to combine moderate reform with moderate repression in Poland was not working very well; the situation there was tense and disorders frequent. Garibaldi’s march on Rome had led to hopeful speculations about the emergence of a revolutionary Italy and even the destruction of Austria.<sup>3</sup> Relations were strained between Austria and Prussia, and there was some ground for hope that the Finns might contribute to the Russian government’s problems. Was not a Franco-Polish war of liberation against Russia at least a possibility? Even the American Civil War seemed a hopeful sign. Thus the proponents of “movement” in Russia looked west and believed that they saw the forces of order and repression everywhere on the defensive. Just as American radicals in the 1960s had a vision of a Third World revolutionary force, led by China, overwhelming



the rigid and unjust order created by American power and the cold war stalemate, Russian radicals needed to envisage their struggle as part of a larger and more powerful movement for change. Even Herzen, prone to caution in such matters, "to some extent" believed in a "rising of the peasants and the army."

The seemingly powerful combination of a militant minority of students (or at least young people) and a vaguely expectant public opinion seems to have endured in the capital until spring. Stirrings of discontent among the gentry, many of whom thought they had been victimized by the Emancipation, helped keep the pot boiling. Ten days before the Emancipation Edict was promulgated in 1861, the British ambassador reported to London that

the necessity for the assertion by the nobility of some sort of political rights in exchange for those of which the Emancipation will deprive them, is a theme which is loudly and publicly discussed at places of public resort in Moscow and the interior cities, and which in various ways, in spite of the Censure, finds its echo in the public press. A desire in short for a Representative Government is very openly expressed.<sup>4</sup>

In February 1862, a gentry group from Tver' province "insisted on the need for an independent judiciary, on 'publicity' for all acts of the government and administration, and again spoke of an 'assembly of delegates elected by the country without distinction of class in order to create free institutions.'"<sup>5</sup> And indications of a similar spirit were evident elsewhere in the country. In June 1862, P. A. Valuev, the minister of the interior, submitted a memorial to Alexander entitled *On the Internal State of Russia*. Valuev pointed out that the government was dangerously isolated. The nobility, or, he wrote acidly, "what is customarily called by that name, does not understand its true interests, is dissatisfied, aroused and somewhat disrespectful, shattered into a plurality of divergent tendencies, so that it nowhere represents a serious support." Even loyalty to the Emperor, Valuev felt, was uncertain. It was absolutely necessary for the government to regain support in *obshchestvo* by encouraging "constructive"



activities, particularly in the economic sphere, thus providing a range of useful occupation for potential frondeurs.<sup>6</sup>

In the capital, the government continued to be alarmed, throughout the winter and spring, at the ceaseless flow of incendiary leaflets and proclamations. A "free university" (much like those that appeared on or near American campuses in the 1960s) continued to keep student consciousness high, although it bogged down in a welter of recrimination over the question of whether lectures should be suspended to protest the arrest of Professor P. V. Pavlov, one of the moving spirits behind the Sunday School movement. At the height of the acrimony, the whole enterprise was terminated by the government.

But the kind of public support that students, and the Left as a whole, enjoyed in St. Petersburg (and elsewhere to a lesser extent) was a volatile and uncertain thing. It was based on no solid tie of social or economic interest. Once the general feeling of relief at the end of Nicholas's despotism had abated, "liberal" public opinion was sustained primarily by the Emancipation drama and the hopes that it engendered. Now Emancipation had been accomplished, however disappointingly, leaving a certain feeling of anticlimax. Public opinion turned out to be disconcertingly dependent upon the *mood* of *obshchestvo*, compounded of a general desire to "move forward" (whatever that might mean), a certain intellectual ferment, and a shallow intoxication with fashionable ideas. The more radical and serious students and members of the intelligentsia did not realize how isolated they were—or, at any rate, might shortly become.

Being insecurely rooted and inadequately grounded, the public opinion of the day was particularly vulnerable to weariness and discouragement. Since the salon "liberals" had very little concrete stake in the new era, it would be easy enough for them to feel that "things" or students "had gone too far." And after a time, people get tired of constant excitement and of heroic but somewhat abstract causes, and yearn again for tranquillity, careerism, and the everyday round. Only if their vital interests are at stake can they persevere indefinitely. Outside the capital—in Moscow, for instance—the level of public support for students



and radicalism was generally lower, and both the activities of the students and their public resonance had been more circumscribed.

One might argue, then, that public support for the Left would soon have diminished in the capital even without the catastrophic events that were soon to occur. Two developments only might have averted a change in the mood of the public: the outbreak of a major peasant disturbance or a striking political success of some kind for reformist *obshchestvo*. If the gentry had been sufficiently organized and able to agree upon a program for wresting a share of political power from the government, the course of events would have been very different. But in fact they were easily cowed. And despite some disorder, the monarchism and docility of the peasants survived the disappointments of the Emancipation. For all of their élan, the activist students had very little idea of what to do next in the winter and spring of 1862, and neither the gentry nor the peasants came to their rescue.

What in fact took place was a series of events that deprived the students of the respect—indeed the veneration—that they had hitherto enjoyed, split their movement, and helped a nationalist “New Right” emerge in Russian society. Disenchanted moderates and conservatives who had hitherto grumbled fearfully in small groups or confided their anxieties to their diaries found it suddenly respectable to do so in public. A. V. Nikitenko, professor of Russian literature at St. Petersburg and a politically moderate censor, wrote in his diary on March 19 that

the prospects before us are becoming gloomier and gloomier. If a certain party prevails, then good-bye to all reasonable, liberal and moderate principles, and the representatives of those principles will be crushed by the crowd, smashing and trampling everything in its path. And what then? A new yoke, new despotism.

And again, on April 14:

All these ultra-progressives are preparing a terrible future for Russia. And what do they want? Instead of gradual but prompt reform, they want an immediate overturn, a revolution, and are attempting to



produce an artificial one. Crazy blind men! They want to posture on stage, want to play at History. . . . Really, does Russia need the kind of revolution they are dreaming up?<sup>7</sup>

Not only was this sort of viewpoint heard in public in the latter spring, but the abruptness of the change in society's mood suggests that public support for the Left had already begun to decay from within.

The catalytic events began with a series of fires in St. Petersburg that broke out on May 15-16 and lasted into early June, although the worst seems to have been over by May 28. A contemporary<sup>8</sup> noted eighteen more or less serious fires, scattered throughout the city, within that period of less than two weeks. Because of the prevalence of wooden buildings, the damage was enormous, some estimates running as high as sixty thousand silver rubles.<sup>9</sup> The culmination came on May 28, when two of the biggest markets and trading points in the city—the Apraksin Dvor and the Shchukin Market—went up. Thousands of shopkeepers and petty traders suffered heavy losses. Prince Peter Kropotkin, then a member of the Corps of Pages in the capital, has left us a vivid description:

The Apraxin Dvor was an immense space, more than half a mile square, which was entirely covered with small shops,—mere shanties of wood,—where all sorts of second and third hand goods were sold. Old furniture and bedding, second-hand dresses and books, poured in from every quarter of the city, and were stored in the small shanties, in the passages between them, and even on their roofs. This accumulation of inflammable materials had at its back the Ministry of the Interior and its archives, where all the documents concerning the liberation of the serfs were kept; and in the front of it, which was lined by a row of shops built of stone, was the state Bank. A narrow lane, also bordered with stone shops, separated the Apraxin Dvor from a wing of the Corps of Pages, which was occupied by grocery and oil shops in its lower story. . . . Almost opposite the Ministry of the Interior, on the other side of a canal, there were extensive timber yards. This labyrinth of small shanties and timber yards opposite took fire almost at the same moment, about four o'clock in the afternoon.

If there had been wind on that day, half the city would have perished in the flames. . . .



I was that afternoon at the Corps, dining at the house of one of our officers, and we dashed to the spot as soon as we saw from the windows the first clouds of smoke rising in our immediate neighborhood. The sight was terrific. Like an immense snake, rattling and whistling, the fire threw itself in all directions, right and left, enveloped the shanties, and suddenly rose in a huge column, darting out its whistling tongues to lick up more shanties with their contents. Whirlwinds of smoke and fire were formed; and when the whirls of burning feathers from the bedding shops began to sweep about the space, it became impossible to remain any longer inside the burning market. The whole had to be abandoned.

The authorities had entirely lost their heads. There was not, at that time, a single steam fire engine in St. Petersburg, and it was workmen who suggested bringing one from the iron works of Kolpino, situated twenty miles by rail from the capital. When the engine reached the railway station, it was the people who dragged it to the conflagration. Of its four lines of hose, one was damaged by an unknown hand, and the other three were directed upon the Ministry of the Interior. . . .

It was the crowd, the people, who did everything to prevent the fire from spreading further and further. There was a moment when the Bank was seriously menaced. The goods cleared from the shops opposite were thrown into the Sadovaya street, and lay in great heaps upon the walls of the left wing of the Bank. The articles which covered the street itself continually took fire, but the people, roasting there in an almost unbearable heat, prevented the flames from being communicated to the piles of goods on the other side. They swore at all the authorities, seeing that there was not a pump on the spot. "What are they all doing at the Ministry of the Interior, when the Bank and the Foundlings' House are going to take fire? They have all lost their heads!" "Where is the chief of police that he cannot send a fire brigade to the Bank?" they said. . . .

The Ministry itself was not on fire; it was the archives which were burning, and many boys, chiefly cadets and pages, together with a number of clerks, carried bundles of papers out of the burning building and loaded them into cabs. Often a bundle would fall out, and the wind, taking possession of its leaves, would strew them about the square. Through the smoke a sinister fire could be seen raging in the timber yards on the other side of the canal.

The narrow lane which separated the Corps of Pages from the Apraxin Dvor was in a deplorable state. The shops which lined it were full of brimstone, oil, turpentine, and the like, and immense tongues of fire of many hues, thrown out by explosions, licked the



roofs of the wing of the Corps, which bordered the lane on the other side. . . .

About three or four in the morning it was evident that bounds had been put to the fire; the danger of its spreading to the Corps was over, and after having quenched our thirst with half a dozen glasses of tea, in a small "white inn" which happened to be open, we fell, half dead from fatigue, on the first bed that we found unoccupied in the hospital of the Corps.<sup>10</sup>

From very early on, arson was suspected. Nikitenko mentions rumors to that effect in his diary entry for May 24,<sup>11</sup> but they were almost certainly afoot before then. On May 25, five separate fires broke out in St. Petersburg, and anxiety began to turn into hysteria: criminals were to blame, agents of Palmerston (!), the Poles. Panteleev heard a remarkable rumor that a general had coated his back with some flammable substance and gone around the city rubbing his back against the walls of buildings, which would then burst into flames.<sup>12</sup> Among the lower classes of the city, recalcitrant gentry who would not accept the Emancipation were sometimes accused.

X But most often the working people of St. Petersburg blamed the students, relating the tumult in the streets over the preceding months to the fires. Again the notion that the students were *opposed* to the Emancipation was heard. The students continued to be regarded as enemies of Tsar and people; it was suddenly crystal clear how poorly the message of the university radicals had been understood by the objects of their concern. What seems to have counted most was that the students were upper-class, idle, and privileged, a particularly obnoxious manifestation of the Russia of landlords and bureaucrats. At the height of the panic it was not safe for students on the streets, and some appealed to the police for protection.<sup>13</sup>

The fires were absolutely terrifying to the population of St. Petersburg, most of all to the lower strata, who lived in wooden houses packed together in a labyrinthine maze of crooked streets and alleys. No one could say when or where disaster would strike next. Skabichevsky, an eyewitness, described the



general panic, which could be seen in the fact that wherever you went you saw suitcases, baskets and parcels, in which poor people and those of modest means had tied up everything that was dearest and most valuable to them, waiting for the first alarm to swiftly carry away their tied-up things. At every apartment building, in addition, there were night watchmen—domestic sentries taking shifts. At the same time, on the streets at night, especially in the outlying districts and out-of-the-way places, volunteers from among the local inhabitants set up nightly patrols. It got to the point that there was some danger in traveling the streets at night. If you looked as if you might be an arsonist, you could be dragged off to the police station and even beaten up, particularly if any kind of suspicious fluid were found on you. . . . I myself saw, on a beautiful morning on Nikol'sky St. where we lived, how a crowd of local householders was walking along and scrutinizing every unusual stain on the fence, every dab, evidently made by some passing painter, trying out his brush or colors. These spots were thoroughly planed off, since there was a rumor that the arsonists had oiled the walls of houses with some kind of stuff which would ignite the walls when the sun's rays fell on it.<sup>14</sup>

What is more surprising, perhaps, is how quickly and naturally many educated people assumed that the fires were part of a left-wing political conspiracy emanating from the university. In government circles and among conservatives, such an assumption was to be expected, but how is one to account for the fact that many political moderates—people who were loosely known as “liberals”—also blamed the students, and without a shred of hard evidence? One might expect such a turnabout from the most shallow and fashionable radicals: Kropotkin reported that

a few days after the conflagration, I went on Sunday to see my cousin, the aide-de-camp of the Emperor, in whose apartment I had often seen the Horse Guard officers in sympathy with Chernyshevsky; my cousin himself had been up till then an assiduous reader of “The Contemporary.” . . . Now he brought several numbers of “The Contemporary,” and, putting them on the table I was sitting at, said to me, “Well, now, after *this* I will have no more of that incendiary stuff; enough of it,”—and these words expressed the opinion of “all St. Petersburg.”<sup>15</sup>



Even more remarkable is the fact that Ivan Turgenev came to the conclusion that radicals were behind the fires, as did Konstantin Kavelin. Kavelin had resigned from the university a few months earlier, and no doubt the frenetic and, in the end, disappointing activities of the last several years had taken their toll on him. His influence over the students had waned; he had lost his job on their behalf, and he seems to have felt keenly their ingratitude—Kavelin often felt that his activities, particularly his sacrifices, were unappreciated. "Can this be called progress?" he wrote to his colleague V. D. Spasovich. "Good God! Such progress merits only buckshot and the gallows. It's clear that people will never become wiser. If reaction now rears its head in triumph, will it be any wonder?"<sup>16</sup> The presumption is strong that well before the outbreak of the fires Kavelin felt that the students had "gone too far"; certainly he assumed their guilt as soon as the fires began.

Of course, the presumption was not altogether absurd. The nerves of *obshchestvo* were strained almost to the breaking point. There was a widespread, if rather indefinite, expectation of either revolution or some major cataclysm. Was it not natural to interpret the fires as being the prelude to upheaval? And in addition, the initial outbreak of the fires coincided with the appearance of a new proclamation, only one of the steady stream that had been appearing, but the most bloodcurdling and extreme by far: the manifesto entitled *Young Russia*, which we will consider below.

With respect to the working-class population of St. Petersburg, one should note that the panic fear of the fires focused hostility on those toward whom the population had previously been antipathetic: the Poles and the gentry. The fact that students were the *dominant* group upon which suspicion fell and against which hostility was directed suggests that they had already become targets of popular antipathy.

Clearly, the *emergence* of this hostility to the students (and to the other scapegoat candidates) was related to a sense that the usual order of things had broken down. The city had been visited by a mysterious catastrophe, before which the authorities, no less



than the victims, were helpless. This sense of the inadequacy of regular institutions and normal ways of understanding what was happening helps account for the extraordinary rumors, like that of the inflammatory general. The rumors, in turn, helped to explain the apparently inexplicable and to induce various forms of self-help, mutual aid, and vigilante activity.

The reaction of *obshchestvo* was somewhat more measured and less activist than that of the working people, but it, too, exhibited a release of latent hostility, an abnormal credulousness and susceptibility to rumor. Many of those who had been happy to question the social order suddenly found themselves much attached to it when it seemed jeopardized by mysterious malefactors. And this sense was easily translated into political conservatism of a gut kind. The fear of upheaval, for many, seems to have replaced the more superficial excitement and sense of liberation previously associated with prospects for dramatic social change.<sup>17</sup>

The appearance of the *Young Russia* manifesto certainly helped along this change in *obshchestvo* opinion. *Young Russia* was signed by something called the Central Revolutionary Committee. It was actually the work of a young student radical, P. G. Zaichnevsky, who had been expelled from the University of Moscow and arrested in the summer of 1861 for propagandizing the peasants of his native Orël province, and a few of his friends. It was written in the relatively lax atmosphere of a Moscow prison of the day, smuggled out, and distributed. Zaichnevsky was nineteen at the time of his arrest, twenty when he wrote *Young Russia*. He was to have a long career as a radical, but his finest hour came early on.

If the *Great Russian* of the previous fall had urged the vital and progressive forces of the country to take action to prevent a *Pugachëvshchina*, *Young Russia* gloried in the prospect. Zaichnevsky and his friends saw the country as divided into two absolutely irreconcilable camps: that of the ruling class and that of the people, with nothing substantial in between. The most bitter kind of struggle was inevitable, a struggle in which "rivers of blood will flow." Recalling the revolts of Stenka Razin and Puga-



chëv, the authors predicted "a revolution, a bloody and pitiless revolution, a revolution which must change everything down to the very roots, utterly overthrowing all the foundations of present society and bringing about the ruin of all who support the present order."<sup>18</sup>

The postrevolutionary vision expressed in the manifesto was in a general way Populist: Russia was to become a decentralized federation in which the peasant *obshchina* and communally run factories would organize production. There were to be free education, the emancipation of women, and the abolition of the parasitic monasteries. All nationalities would be given the right to secede from the federated republic that would emerge from the bloody chaos attendant upon the demise of the old order. But a new revolutionary viewpoint and strategy made its appearance: the revolutionary dictatorship of a minority. This "Jacobin" approach to the problem of revolution was to have a long and eventful history in Russia, culminating in the Bolshevik seizure of power in 1917. Jacobinism is frequently the outcome of a situation in which an intelligentsia minority has been powerfully radicalized but despairs of mass support from other elements of society, or conceives of that support as merely negative or destructive. The authors of *Young Russia* believed that the exploited Russian peasant could—and would—sweep away the old order. They believed that the way of life and institutions of the peasantry would be the foundation upon which the new Russia would emerge. But they thought that only a militant minority of students and intellectuals—the most militant and resolute elements of the intelligentsia—would have the vision and the organizational capacity necessary to bring the new order into existence, to harness the destructive force of the upheaval, and to preside over the ruthless liquidation of all residues and traces of Russia's imperial past. Hence, a transitional dictatorship of the intelligentsia would be absolutely necessary, a dictatorship that would "stop at nothing."

What has generally interested historians about *Young Russia*



is precisely the emergence of this Jacobin viewpoint, which in many doctrinal guises would recur in Russia until 1917, despite the periodic episodes of revulsion against its antidemocratic elitism and extremism, despite such powerful opponents as Kropotkin and Rosa Luxemburg. Needless to say, public opinion in St. Petersburg and Moscow in May 1862 was scarcely able to view the manifesto in this light. *Young Russia* struck them almost wholly by its bloodcurdling language and its consignment of nearly all of *obshchestvo* to total destruction. It was a document ideally calculated at any time to convince moderates and "liberals" that their future lay with gentle, if not imperceptible, attempts to reform the existing order. Its distribution at the end of many months of extreme social excitement and tension, in conjunction with a series of devastating fires in Russian cities, was ideally calculated to push all but the most extreme and dedicated radicals far toward the right, to reinforce decisively the impression that the new era had been a Pandora's box. In short, it played directly into the hands of the government—as Herzen, Bakunin, and Chernyshevsky all recognized.

On about May 14, a copy of *Young Russia* had fallen into the hands of the authorities in Moscow; at about the same time, the first copies made their appearance in St. Petersburg, circulated both through the mails and on the street. The timing could not have been more perfect. The public became aware of the manifesto precisely at the moment that the first suspicions of arson were being voiced, and the social reaction to *Young Russia* developed in the atmosphere of feverish paranoia induced by the fires.<sup>19</sup> And fire was one of the destructive agencies specifically mentioned by the manifesto. Very rapidly—almost overnight—the attitude of *obshchestvo* hardened against students, radicals, and disturbers of the peace.

Government and conservative circles were at first astonished and frightened, but they soon realized that the situation was propitious for a major counterattack against the forces of insurrection and chaos. On June 10, Count S. N. Urusov, a member of the State Council and head of the Second Section of His Majesty's



Own Chancery (in charge of legal codification), wrote to an influential figure in the Church that

in recent days we have been worried by the fires. This terrible misfortune, which has overwhelmed thousands of the poor, has nevertheless had the salutary effect of revealing, in all its force, the devotion of the real Russian people to Belief and its fidelity to the Sovereign. I myself saw how the people prayed in this terrible time and myself heard how moved they were by the presence of their Tsar at the fire and by his grief. The Empress deigned to be at the place of devastation during the day; I was not there, but everyone told me that at the appearance of Her Majesty the rapture of those who had been burned out was indescribable. But as powerfully, on the one hand, as the people was moved by a feeling of love, their feeling of loathing for the enemies of church and state was equally powerful. Those who had hoped to find support among the people for their efforts to shake all authority have been deeply deceived.<sup>20</sup>

Neither the investigating commission constituted by the government nor subsequent efforts by historians have been able to shed much light on who was responsible for the fires. No evidence has been found to connect either radicals, attempting to ignite an insurrection, or reactionaries, trying to move the country and the government to the right, with the fires. Either hypothesis *might* be true. Because the fires so obviously played into the government's hands, some nineteenth-century radicals and Soviet historians came to believe that they were a provocation, contrived to justify the repressive measures that began on May 28, with the proclamation of what amounted to martial law in St. Petersburg, and continued into the summer.

There is a third possibility. It is conceivable that the fires were the work not of any group with a defined political aim but of various individuals who for widely divergent reasons contributed to the wave of arson. Contagion in such things is not unknown. Once the setting of fires became a recognized possibility, as it were, many different motives—material gain, individual pathology, and so on—may have prompted people to take action. We know of two such cases: a merchant tried to set a fire in order to collect insurance, and a “deranged teacher” with vaguely radical



sympathies set several others. S. Reiser, the leading Soviet student of the fires, mentions both cases, but as he is psychologically committed to the idea that the fires were not a manifestation of unbalanced radicalism but of right-wing Machiavellianism, he does not consider the idea that the two arsonists whom the investigating commission *did* discover might have been typical; any more than did the moderate and conservative opinion of the day, which tended to blame the student Left.

The repressive measures that the government undertook in the spring and summer of 1862 provoked remarkably little public outcry; either the fires and the appearance of *Young Russia* had drastically weakened *obshchestvo* opposition to government repression, or the government had seriously overestimated the strength of gentry "liberalism" and radicalism in the aftermath of the Emancipation. In the July 15 number of the *Bell*, Herzen gave a graphic picture of the summer of 1862.

In St. Petersburg there is terror—the most dangerous and mindless kind of all, that of cowardice confused. Not the terror of the lion but that of the calf, a terror in which the demented government, not knowing the source of the danger, knowing neither its strengths nor its weaknesses and hence pontificating nonsense, is helped by society, literature, the people, progress and regress. . . .

The *Day*\* has been suppressed, the *Contemporary* and the *Russian Word* have been suppressed, the Sunday Schools have been closed, the Chess Club has been closed and so have the reading rooms, the money intended for poor students has been taken away, supervision of the presses has been redoubled, two ministers and the Third Section have to authorize the reading of public lectures; there are constant arrests.<sup>21</sup>

With a qualification or two, Herzen's vivid picture may stand. Not only were the *Russian Word* and the *Contemporary* both closed down for a time, but Pisarev and Chernyshevsky had been arrested—word of this had not yet reached Herzen in London. The arrest of Chernyshevsky, however, appears to have been

\*The *Day* (*Den*) was a Slavophile periodical edited by Ivan Aksakov.



long contemplated by the government and was not a hasty step taken in response to the tumult of the spring. Indeed, the government was somewhat less confused than Herzen allowed. Given its fear of social chaos, even revolution, there was nothing irrational about cracking down on the Left in July 1862 if it was politically possible to do so, and the government's rather crude tactics were effective.

What the fires and *Young Russia* had inaugurated, the outbreak of a full-scale revolt in Poland the following January furthered and developed. Polonophilia, long a common feature of European liberalism and radicalism, had a special meaning and a special volatility in Russia. Catherine the Great, after all, had been the principal author of the infamous partitions that had altogether removed a once-great state from the map of Europe. Russian guilt over what the dynasty had done could manifest itself in tearful declarations of contrition and resounding expressions of good intentions—the effusions of Emperor Alexander I to Prince Czartoryski are a case in point. On the other hand, the rivalry and hatred between the two nations was old and deep. Catholic Poles had traditionally gloried in their membership in the exclusive club of European or Western nations; they were prone to remark to Western European visitors that Asia began at the Russian border. After the protracted and bloody conflicts with their Western neighbor, Russians savored the long, slow eclipse of Polish state power in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; only in the most cosmopolitan and “enlightened” circles were the partitions criticized. For most of *obshchestvo*, Polonophobia was a deeper and older emotion than the remarks they were sometimes heard to make at dinner that Poland's wrongs ought to be redressed.

Alexander I had given Russia's portion of Poland (the lion's share) a constitution—much to the chagrin of some of his officers, who hoped that he would think first of making his own subjects into citizens—but it had been revoked after the ungrateful Poles revolted in 1830. Since then, Poland had been treated—more or less—like a conquered province.

Sympathy for Poland had become a fashionable attitude in



*obshchestvo* circles during the new era, and had been notably characteristic of the student Left. There had been well-organized groups of Polish students at most Russian universities in the late 1850s; although the Poles as a group were rather suspicious of their Russian colleagues, there was considerable Russian student support for Polish national aspirations. Many of the more radical Russian students devoted a lot of effort to convincing their Polish confreres that their ultimate goals were not in conflict. The Polish cause was naturally not popular in nationalist circles, but a certain unfocused sympathy for Poland could sometimes be detected among such younger Slavophiles as Ivan Aksakov and Iury Samarin, and among old-fashioned patriots like the conservative historian Mikhail Pogodin.<sup>22</sup> Many of the radical proclamations of 1861–62 had made some mention of Polish liberty.

All this changed abruptly when a major rebellion against Russian rule broke out in January 1863, and Russian nationalism was further exacerbated by the futile remonstrances of England and France, which the Russian government ignored. Guilt and unease gave way to patriotic fervor; the Poles were blamed for the fires of the preceding year, and Polish participation in the student disorders was recalled and exaggerated. The principal spokesman for the aroused Russian national feeling was Mikhail Katkov, Herzen's old companion, a former "liberal" Westerner and editor of the *Russian Herald*. "Between these two co-tribal nationalities, history has always posed the fateful question of life and death," Katkov wrote in an article entitled simply "The Polish Question." "Both states were not simply rivals, but enemies which could not live side by side, enemies to the end. Between them the question was not simply which will gain first place, which will become mightier; rather the question was which of them will exist."<sup>23</sup> Katkov's career as the most influential journalistic representative of extreme Russian chauvinism had begun, and for the moment he carried much of educated Russian public opinion with him. His two journals, the *Moscow Gazette* (*Moskovskie vedomosti*) and the *Russian Herald*, had a combined circula-



tion of almost eighteen thousand, an altogether exceptional audience for a single journalist at the time.

Those who stood against the tide—and this meant the most resolute elements on the Left—were simply swamped. Herzen was especially identified with the cause of Poland, and from mid-1863 the *Bell* went into a period of rapid decline, its circulation according to Kornilov falling to a mere five hundred.<sup>24</sup>

By the end of 1863, the public mood in Russia was vastly different from what it had been only eighteen months before. Land and Liberty, the first tentatively revolutionary organization in Russia since the Decembrists, had petered out; Chernyshevsky and Pisarev were in jail; there was no real student movement; and even the London *Times* could discern that Katkov was the real spokesman for public opinion in Russia. Times had changed.

Alexander Herzen, with his customary perspicacity, understood how crucial public opinion was in defining what had happened.

There was a revolution in society itself. Some were sobered by the emancipation of the peasants; others were simply tired by political agitation; they wished for the former repose; they were satiated before a meal which had cost them so much trouble.

It cannot be denied: our breath is short and our endurance is long!

Seven years of liberalism had exhausted the whole reserve of radical aspirations. All that had been amassed and compressed in the mind since 1825 was expended in raptures of joy, in the foretaste of good things to come. After the truncated emancipation of the peasants people with weak nerves thought that Russia had gone too far, was going too quickly.

At the same time, the *radical* party, young, and for that reason full of theories, began to announce its intentions more and more impulsively, frightening a society that was frightened even before this. It set forth as its ostensible aim such extreme outcomes, that liberals and champions of gradual progress crossed themselves and spat, and ran away stopping their ears, to hide under the old, filthy, but familiar blanket of the police. The headlong haste of the students and the landowners' want of practice in listening to other people could not help bringing them to blows.

The force of public opinion, hardly called to life, manifested itself as a savage conservatism. It declared its participation in public affairs



by elbowing the government into the debauchery of terror and persecution.<sup>25</sup>

The bridges between nascent Russian radicalism and the rest of society had been, for the time being, largely destroyed, and the next phase of Russian radicalism was to reflect strongly the isolated militancy of the extreme Left and its increasing attraction toward terrorism and conspiracy.

Before turning to the heirs of *Young Russia*, however, we must take note of the development of a radical consciousness, the product of the drama of the Emancipation itself, and its anticlimactic aftermath—as well as the development of a Populist view of Russia's history, which could provide the "usable past" so necessary to a persistent radicalism. Afanasy Prokof'evich Shchapov was Populism's historian of the *narod*, and Pavel Ivanovich Iakushkin, more than anyone else, created a persona for the new radicals. It is to their lives that we must now turn our attention.